

Name: _____

Date: _____

English 5 _____

The Story of Theseus

From Classic Myths to Read Aloud: The Great Stories of Greek & Roman Mythology William F. Russell



Theseus stayed with his father all the winter, and when the spring equinox [EE-quin-ox] drew near, all the Athenians grew sad and silent, and Theseus saw this and asked why it should be, but no one would explain it to him. Then he went to his father, and he asked about why the people were sad, but Aegeus turned his face away and wept. "Do not ask, my son, about evils that must come to pass," he said. "It is enough to wait for them and face them when they arrive."

And when the spring equinox did come, there also came to Athens a black-sailed ship, which put into the harbor, and a herald came from the ship and made his way to the marketplace. Here he cried aloud, "O people of Athens, hear me well.

It is time for your yearly tribute, so assemble your youths and maidens at once, for we sail with the tide to Crete [KREET]."

Then Theseus went to the herald and said, "I am a stranger here. Pray, tell me the meaning of your message so that I might know why mighty Athens should pay a tribute to anyone."

And the herald related to Theseus the whole story of the war between Athens and Crete, and how King Minos [MY-nos] of Crete had laid siege to Athens and would have let all the people there starve to death if they had not agreed to pay him a tribute each year. But what a terrible price the Athenians agreed to pay for their lives: Every year, at the spring equinox, the people of Athens must send seven youths and seven young maidens to King Minos, who then feeds them, alive, to a terrible monster called the Minotaur [MY-nuh-tore]. So once each year, all the boys and girls of Athens are called together in the marketplace, and there they draw lots to see which fourteen unlucky ones will be sent away to Crete, there to be given to the Minotaur for food.

Now when Theseus heard this incredible tale, he knew why there was so much sorrow in the city, and he went to his father and said, "I will go myself with these youths and maidens, and I shall slay the Minotaur and rid Athens of ever having to pay this tribute again."

But Aegeus shuddered at this and cried, "You shall not go, my son, for you are the light of my old age and the person who must rule this land when I am dead and gone. If you go to fight the Minotaur, you will surely die a horrible death, for the beast is kept inside the Labyrinth [LAB-uh-rinth], which the cunning architect Daedalus [DEAD-uh-luss] built with so many winding and bewildering paths that no one who enters it can ever find his way out again. Here, entangled in the winding corridors, lives a monster who is half man and half bull and who feeds on human flesh. No, my son, I beg you not to give up your life this way."

But Theseus was only the more convinced that it was his duty to slay the horrid beast, and he told his father that somehow he would find a way to kill the Minotaur and escape the Labyrinth as well. Aegeus clung to his son's knees and, weeping bitterly, pleaded for him to stay, but Theseus had made up his mind. Finally, seeing that Theseus would not be swayed from his course, his father asked him one favor, saying, "Prom-

ise me that, if you do come back alive and well, you will strike the black sail of the ship and hoist a white one instead, for I will be watching every day from the cliffs, and if only white sails I see, then I will know that you are well and will someday return to my side. Promise me this, my son, and may the gods be with you on your quest."

And Theseus promised he would honor his father's request, and went out to the marketplace where the herald stood, watching the drawing of lots that would decide who was to sail in that doleful crew. And the people stood wailing and weeping as first one was chosen, then the next, and the next. But Theseus strode into the midst, and cried, "Here is a youth who needs not be chosen by lot; I will be one of the seven." Then did the people give a great cheer, for they now had hope that perhaps mighty Theseus could put an end to their yearly misery.

The townspeople followed Theseus and the thirteen unfortunates down to the black-sailed ship, and the herald from Crete was with them and so was King Aegeus. Theseus tried to comfort Aegeus, saying, "Father, I am young and strong, and I have overcome many monsters and giants before this. Fear not, for this Minotaur is not immortal, and if he can be slain, then I shall do it." But his words cheered neither his father nor his companions, for they knew that even if the monster could be slain, whoever accomplished the feat could never find the way back to the entrance of the Labyrinth. So there was much sobbing both on the ship and on the dock as the tide came in and the fairest of all Athens sailed off toward their deaths on Minos's island kingdom.

After several days, the ship reached Crete, and the young people were led into the king's presence. Minos looked at each one to assure himself that the exact tribute had been paid, and then he commanded his guards to take them to a prison cell and lock them up this night, for in the morning they would be fed to the monster one by one. Then Theseus stepped forward and cried, "A favor, O King! Let me be thrown first to the beast, for I came here of my own will, and it is only right that I should precede those who were forced here by lot."

Minos, then, could see that this was no ordinary youth standing before him, and when he learned that it was, in fact, the prince of Athens, he said, "It is wrong that one so brave

should meet such an inglorious end, and so I say to you, brave prince, go back to your home this night; the Minotaur will be satisfied with your companions alone."

But Theseus would not leave the others, and he repeated his demand that he be the first of all to face the monster. Now Minos was angered at having his kindness refused, and he said to Theseus, "You have sealed your own fate, rash prince; tomorrow you shall have your wish. Now, guards, away with them!"

It happened that King Minos's daughter, the beautiful and tender-hearted Ariadne [air-ee-ADD-nee], had witnessed this encounter, and her beating heart was filled with love for the courage that Theseus had displayed. "He shall not die, if there is some way I can save him," she said to herself.

Later that night, Ariadne crept down to the dungeon beneath the palace, and she unlocked the cell in which Theseus was being held. "Flee to the ship at once," she said to him, "for I have bribed the guards to look the other way. Take your friends with you, but I beg you to take me, too, for my father will cause me to die a miserable death when he finds out what I have done."

Theseus stood silent for a while, for he was stunned by her beauty. At last he said to her, "Dear princess, I cannot go home in peace until I have slain this Minotaur and avenged the deaths of the youths and maidens he has so cruelly devoured. Help me in this quest and I shall gladly take you home with me in triumph."

Then she loved him all the more, and she said, "Fair prince, you are too bold, but I can be of help to you. Here is a sharp sword for you to carry, so that you won't have to face the beast unarmed. And here is a ball of string, the end of which you must fasten tightly to the gate of the Labyrinth, and the string must unwind without breaking through all the twisting passageways so that, after you have slain the monster, you can follow the string back to the entrance."

Now Theseus smiled, for he knew that he would be safe. He kissed Ariadne for a long while, and she wept for fear that her plan might fail. Then the princess led him, quietly, out of the palace and toward the great Labyrinth that lay some distance away. At the gate, Theseus made sure to fasten one end of the string tightly, and he played out the rest of the ball as he

wandered through the many dark and winding passages.

After encountering a seemingly endless set of blind corridors and blocked passageways, and after doubling back his course so many times that he had lost all sense of direction, he at last came into an open court. There lay the Minotaur, fast asleep, for he expected no food until the next morning. Theseus stopped short, for he had never seen such a strange beast. His body was that of a man, but his head was the head of a bull, and his teeth were like those of a lion, so sharp and strong that they could tear apart any prey. The monster sensed the presence of someone nearby, and he awoke with a roar that sent a shiver through Theseus's body and weakened his knees. Still the prince knew his duty, and he raised the sword Adriadne had given him, just as the Minotaur charged headlong toward him. Theseus stepped nimbly aside, avoiding the monster's charge, and he struck the body of the passing beast with his sword, wounding the Minotaur and causing it to bellow even louder. Again it charged, with its head down and its sharp horns ready to rip apart the body of the man who had caused him this pain. But this time Theseus brought his sword above his head with both hands, and as the beast rushed blindly by, down came the blade with such a force that the monster's head was severed completely from its body, and its life's blood gushed out all around.

Now, weary from his adventure, Theseus turned to locate the ball of string he had brought with him, and finding it nearby, he followed its course through all the passageways he had traversed before, until at last it led him to the gate of the Labyrinth. Here, waiting for him, was none other than Ariadne, and Theseus held her tightly in his arms as he whispered, "It is done! The terrible beast is dead!"

Together they returned to the dungeon, where they opened the cells of all the Athenians who had expected to die on the following morning. Then Theseus led them all, including the lovely Princess Ariadne, down to the black-sailed ship on which they had come to Crete. He lifted the anchor, and before morning could alert King Minos to the events that had taken place that night, they were well out to sea and rejoicing at their great good fortune.

Ah, but great tragedy lay just ahead, for in his haste to return to Athens, Theseus forgot the promise he had made to his fa-

ther, and he did not replace the black sail with a white one. Aegeus, therefore, who watched the sea day after day from high atop an overlooking cliff, straining his tired old eyes to see the color of every sail in the distance, now was filled with terror at the sight of the black-sailed vessel he had feared so. Knowing by this sign that his dear son Theseus had perished in Crete, Aegeus felt that his own life was no longer worth living, and so he leaped from the cliff and fell to his death in the sea below. From that day on, the water that claimed Aegeus's life became known by the name of the old king, and still today it is called the Aegean Sea.

A Few Words More

Although, as we have seen, many modern words have come into English directly from the ancient myths, the tale of Theseus and the Minotaur has enriched our language, not by originating a word, but by giving a new and different meaning to an existing word. Even in Chaucer's time, there was a common English word *clewe*, which meant "a ball of thread or string." Now the story of Theseus's escape from the Labyrinth, and the story of Ariadne's ingenious method for him to retrace his steps, were well known and frequently told among the English people. And because it was the *clewe* of string that guided the hero back to the entrance of the maze, the meaning of the word *clewe* gradually changed, and the word began to be applied to other situations in which it signified not "a ball of string" but "the ball of string that solved a great mystery." Time also worked a change on the spelling of the word, so that today, when we use the word *clue*, we mean "anything that aids the solution to a mystery or a problem," but without the help of Theseus and Ariadne, we might be talking about something entirely different.